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## DINNERS AND DINERS.

BY LADY JEUNE.

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THE feasts and banquets of former days are, mercifully for us in these later times, relegated to public occasions only, and are regarded as a doubtful pleasure by those who are obliged to partake of them. Hospitality, which used to be dispensed wholesale, is now spread over a larger and wider area ; but dinner has become the distinctive repast of England, and the giving of dinner is the way in which English people best like to entertain and show hospitality to their friends. In other countries hospitality is dispensed in other ways, though, indeed, among certain classes in society abroad dinner is as important an event as with us. In England both the size of our houses and our daily occupations prevent those who live in towns from receiving strangers as their guests. Our English country life represents among our people that particular form of hospitality, but in London we are driven perforce to confine our hospitality to the dinner-hour, and it is at an English dinner-table that we exhibit one of the most pleasant aspects of English life. There is no prettier sight, none more characteristic of the ease and luxury in which we live, than a large, well-arranged dinner-table in London ; and this is not in any way the monopoly of the rich, for nowadays, when the decoration of rooms is not expensive, when flowers are fairly cheap, and when the taste of Englishwomen has so much improved, it is in the power of every hostess to make her entertainment as pretty as she can desire. The clean white cloth, the sparkling glass, the shaded light, the smell of the fresh flowers, and the well-dressed women surrounding the table form a brilliant centre to the finely decorated dining-rooms of most of the houses in London.

Nothing can be more different than the dinner of to-day to

that of thirty years ago, and the change is in every way an advantage. A long table, covered with empty silver *entrée* dishes, on each of which in due time eight, or ten, or more *entrées* and joints, according to the number of guests, were deposited, to be solemnly taken round in turn, is the part most vividly impressed on one's memory. One had always the most profound pity for the host and hostess, who were obliged to carve the joint at their respective ends of the table, the duty in the hostess' case generally falling to the unhappy man who took her in to dinner, and who consequently got no dinner himself. The cooking was heavy and coarse and the food most substantial; for quantity, not quality, was the distinctive characteristic of the repast. The art of carving was a necessary accomplishment, and it was wonderful to see the dexterity and neatness with which a good carver could minister to the wants of a large party from a very ordinary sized joint. As dinner was served upon the table, artistic cooks had great opportunity to devise pretty looking dishes, and there was always plenty of scope for their talents in the endless array of puddings, jellies, etc., which came at the end of the feast. To families who were possessed of fine plate, a dinner-table in those days was a magnificent sight, covered as it was with all the treasures of the family plate-chest, and the heavy cut-glass was also in its way an embellishment. In houses where there is a fine collection of plate, it is even now always used for decorating the table. Nothing can be more gorgeous or brilliant than the display of silver and gold at Windsor at state dinners, when the Queen's plate, which is the finest in the world, is exhibited.

The custom of removing the tablecloth after dinner and arranging the dessert on the plain mahogany table has also passed away, and in many ways one regrets it. Nothing looked prettier than the brown mahogany table, burnished almost to the brilliancy of a looking-glass, covered with large silver dishes of fruit, and silver candelabra, with its fringe of bright color from the dresses of the women sitting around it. The modern fashion of covering the table with flowers has made the retention of this custom impossible, and it is rarely seen now except in houses where an old mahogany table is still looked on as a precious relic of the ancient customs.

In former days the real business of the evening only began with the removal of the cloth and the retirement of the ladies, for

not until then did the men of the party really devote themselves to what was considered the important part of the evening's amusement. It was when the ladies had retired to the drawing-room for the long, dreary time before the men appeared, that the host produced the treasures of his cellar for his guests, and that they in return gave up a large portion of the evening to their consumption. In fact, dinner was an occasion in which everything was sacrificed to the one object of having a "heavy drink." The wines drunk were of a much heavier kind than now, and much more was drunk after dinner. Champagne, sherry, claret, and burgundy were drunk during the meal, the two latter, as well as port, during dessert. There was no smoking after dinner, for cigarettes were unknown, and so, facing a phalanx of bottles in silver stands, the men drank on steadily during the evening. How well one remembers the long time after dinner, when all the jokes and scandal were exhausted, and in sheer desperation a "little music" was proposed in the vain hope that the warbling sounds might tempt the faithless revellers away. For the moment the heavy wines of those days are no longer drunk. Champagne is the fashionable wine, and it is drunk almost universally during and after dinner. The possessors of fine cellars may grumble, as they do, at the degeneracy of to-day, but after a cigarette and a glass or two of champagne, every one wants to get to the drawing-room, and many are the complaints one hears of the bottles of claret opened after dinner and left untouched.

The serious, dull, heavy, and expensive dinner, had its doom sealed when the custom of serving dinner *à la Russe* came into vogue. The conservatism of English society would have struggled much longer against the innovation but for the fact that its adoption reduced the expense of entertaining enormously. Instead of heavy joints, endless *entrées* and puddings, a dinner could consist of as little or as much as the hostess felt inclined to give. The trouble of carving was obviated, and in all ways the fashion was a distinct improvement. For some years old-fashioned people struggled against it, and even now there are perhaps one or two houses where the host still clings to his old prejudices, but the instances are so few one can hardly name them. With the introduction of dinners *à la Russe* the whole condition of cooking changed, and the lighter but richer *cuisine*

of the French was adopted. The time of transition was a terrible one to those who remember it, for the English cooking of some thirty years ago was very bad, as English cooks were not *artistes*, and for one good dinner there were hundreds of very bad ones.

But let us be thankful that the period of transition is passed and that English people have realized that good plain cooking is infinitely to be preferred to an ambitious bad French *cuisine*, and that a good plain dinner is within the reach of every one. The National School of Cookery at South Kensington has done much towards improving the English *cuisine*, and though it is vastly worse and more extravagant than that of any other country, it is not nearly as bad as it was. There is great room yet for improvement, for our dinners are still much too long and we give too much to eat. Persons dining alone would never dream of consuming the amount of food they eat every time they dine out, and there can be no possible reason why any one should eat more in company than when alone. Some attempts are being made to reduce the quantity of food and the time taken to consume it, and dining, as we do now, at half-past eight must doubtless help to shorten it; otherwise a dinner would last well on into the night.

No dinner should consist of more than eight dishes, viz., soup, fish, *entrée*, joint, game, sweet, *hor-d'œuvre*, and perhaps an ice, but each dish should be perfect of its kind, and no dinner should last more than an hour and a quarter if properly served. Instead of this, dinners are constantly two hours long, and we double the quantity of food I mention. Can anything be more wearisome, tiring to the digestion, and wearing to one's self and one's neighbors than two hours' conversation with no chance to escape, without even the privilege, if one is bored, of being silent? Even the greatest wit, the most brilliant *raconteur*, becomes monotonous after such a trial. Nothing can be in worse taste and more wearisome than a long heavy repast, which is served with great ostentation, and where the guests are made to feel that their duty is to direct time and energy to the sole task of getting through and tasting each dish that is brought to them.

There are some houses, indeed, where the dinner is so proverbially good that to expect to be amused and also well fed is to be guilty of real ingratitude; while in others, though gastronomically one does not fare as well, one is better entertained. Such

dinners as the latter are becoming more exceptional, for the average cooking in England has so much improved one rarely runs the risk of being poisoned, and the great mixture of society prevents one from being insufferably dull.

A really pleasant dinner-party ought never to be a very large one, but the rapidly increasing size of London society almost entirely precludes people who entertain a great deal from enjoying the pleasure of a small one. The golden rule of hospitality should be always to return the civility of others, and one should not dine at the house of any person whom one does not intend to invite in return. However strictly people may adhere to this rule, the size of society makes dinners, as well as all other forms of entertainment, large, and the number of guests is generally limited only by the size of the dining-room. The traditionally ideal dinner, which ought to consist of eight or ten people, well known to one another, and all good talkers, at a round table, so that the conversation may be general, has become a dream of the past; and in its place we have the large dinner of to-day, at which general conversation is out of the question, and where one is limited to the society of one's next-door neighbors.

Sometimes where there is space, two tables are an ingenious way of dividing guests, and of diminishing the sense of oppression which a very large dinner always gives. But we have not adopted the plan with any great alacrity in England, from the strong objection any social change always encounters at its initiation in this most conservative country. Many people object to it from an idea that the company at the other table is more amusing than at theirs, and others object when the tables are multiplied (as they sometimes are) indefinitely, on the ground that it is like a restaurant. It is, however, in many respects a better way than arranging the dinner at the large ordinary dinner-table, where anything like general conversation is out of the question. Conversation can be more or less general at a table of eight, ten, or twelve guests; besides this is a less formal mode of entertainment. The great length of dinners in London, and their lateness, have been mainly brought about by the late hour at which after-dinner society begins, for no one goes to a ball before midnight, and the evening has to be killed in some way or other; and thus dinners grow later every year. Now a quarter past eight is the usual invitation,

and half past eight or a quarter to nine is not too liberal an interpretation of the invitation.

The composition of a dinner is one of the most important matters; and on that much of its success must depend. It is always a mistake to compose a dinner entirely of brilliant people, by that I mean intellectually brilliant. They are generally envious, critical of one another, and for these reasons none of them is seen at his best. One generally finds the pleasantest dinners are those composed of average people, for though a brilliant galaxy of guests gives a dinner a certain distinction, it is just as likely as not to be a dull one. I have a very vivid recollection of a dinner composed of people each of whom was distinguished in every sense of the word. A prime minister, two cabinet ministers, a distinguished soldier, one of the greatest ecclesiastics of the day, a brilliant scientific man, a great journalist, a distinguished lawyer, added to several agreeable and pretty women, made up a dinner which at first sight seemed to promise a rare feast of intellectual delight, but which one of the guests declared was the dullest dinner he had ever sat down to. If such were always the case, one would despair of the arrangement of any dinner, and indeed the conviction is often forced on one that a judicious mixture of ordinary and brilliant people affords on the whole the best chance of giving a pleasant and successful one. Among a large number of guests a very brilliant talker is thrown away, for it is only at a small table when all the guests can hear and see and, if required, add their *quota* to the general flow of conversation that that such a person adds to the general enjoyment, though it should not, also, be forgotten that very often such a guest frightens others less brilliant than himself, absorbing all the attention, and stifling the efforts of his companions. What is required at dinner is that every one should be quick and sufficiently well educated to keep up the battledore and shuttlecock of small-talk, and that no one should be so much more brilliant and egotistical as to swamp every other person's individuality.

If we were to ask the majority of men what they consider the dullest kind of dinners, they would certainly say those where there are no women; and women would naturally express the same opinion as regards dinners only of their own sex. The former is, of course, common enough, as business and professional men give such dinners, and there are many occasions when they are un-

avoidable. Women's dinners are not customary yet, nor indeed have they been much tried in England. Now and then some venturesome women have attempted to gather together a few enterprising sisters, and have banished the male element, and despite of the chaff and ridicule of the "lords of the creation," these are pleasant enough. With higher education and greater freedom of thought and conversation, the society of intelligent women in England is sufficiently enjoyable without the presence of men, though I know that this is an opinion in which there is no general concurrence. We have been brought up with the conviction that no form of entertainment is complete without men, and as the hour of dinner, the arrangement, the care bestowed on it, and the improvement of cooking have all grown out of that feeling, it requires courage not only to say this, but to believe it.

Girls are much more generally invited to dinners now than formerly, and they enjoy it enormously, but that, again, is the result of the great changes that have come over the intellectual position and interest of women in England. Thirty years ago few girls would have chosen a dinner in preference to a ball; now there are hundreds who would not hesitate for a moment as to their choice, for the range of thought and conversation is so wide, the subjects of discussion so varied, that a well-educated girl is well able to hold her own and take a part in the discussion of almost all the topics of the day. The presence of pretty girls enlivens and brightens up a dinner-table, and no man, however great and clever, need fear being bored by having only a girl to be his neighbor at a dinner-table.

The old saying as regards giving dinners in London, "Cutlet for cutlet," has fortunately long ceased to be true; no one is invited to dinner only because a dinner is expected in return. People are invited for every reason but that, and it is in the mixture and variety we meet at a dinner-table that the secret of its success rests. This gives it piquancy; and interests and even animosities, political differences, and social bitterness disappear under the soothing influence of "*Crème de volaille*, woodcock, Pommery, and cigarettes" and the society of pleasant and pretty women. It is idle to disguise that, of all social influences, none is more potent than the dinner-table. Every hostess will necessarily be careful not to invite impossible combinations; but in England, most people, however divergent their opinions or



occupations, forget them all under the softened light and soothing surroundings of an agreeable dinner-party. The story of how the present Speaker of the House of Commons, with rare tact, decided to waive all regulations about evening dress, and invited the advanced party in the House of Commons who abjured general society to dine with him at his official residence, is so well known that there is no indiscretion in alluding to it. One has heard over and over again how they met, and under the soothing influence of a good dinner, wine, and graceful hospitality, the conflicting elements were brought together and they passed an evening as unique as it was hilarious. Dinner is the great levelling institution of society. A party or a ball is an entertainment people are pleased at being invited to; but nothing brings classes together, nothing levels distinctions, nothing gives satisfaction, so much as dining at the same table. Hospitality is dispensed widely and lavishly enough in England, and the houses of the rich are open to the most cosmopolitan of crowds; but such society is outside and apart from that which is composed of the people one asks to dinner, and a dinner invitation is a sign that a recruit has been added to the ranks of the society which only bestows that recognition on a favored few. As I said before, the excellence of the *cuisine* is a point not to be disregarded; but given that the food is well cooked, people never think of it in comparison to the society they meet. The saying "I do not know what the dinner was like; I only know I enjoyed the evening very much" is the greatest tribute to the success of a host or hostess in amusing friends.

The best test of popularity is the number of invitations to dinner which people receive, and as, owing to the increasing size of society, dinners are exceeding in number every other form of invitation, popular people need rarely, if ever, dine at home; and their going out is simply limited to their powers of endurance and digestion. It must be this cause which has made it the fashion to give very long invitations to dinner; five or six weeks is not unusual in the season, and three weeks or a month is the usual time. Some people are unprocurable except at such a distance of time. To the entertainer it does not practically matter on what day his dinner is given, but the length of invitation often makes a refusal impossible; and cruel fate, which so loves to play mischievous tricks with us often sends another, if not more than one,

pleasant invitation for a date to which we are bound. It is impossible, except for a royal command, to throw over a dinner invitation ; it is the one social sin which we in England, who are indulgent enough in other respects, resent very keenly. Wednesdays and Saturdays are the days in London on which dinners are most frequent, as they are the only evenings on which the House of Commons does not sit, and it is impossible to get any member of the government to dine on any other evening during the session. On these evenings, therefore, the preponderance of guests is political. One of the few indications of the existence of Sunday observance in England still shows itself in the fact that few dinners are given on Sunday. The religious feeling against them still remains, and among business men, lawyers, and such like the idea that Sunday should be indeed a day of rest is still very strong, while among servants there is a great dislike to Sunday festivities.

With the rapidly increasing size of society in England it would be impossible for any kind of intimacy or friendship to grow up in the huge crowds where movement and conversation become daily more difficult, and therefore dinner has become and will continue to become a more important and more frequent event in our social life. It is the easiest and quickest way of getting people together and of bringing into contact those who otherwise would never meet—in some ways the most economical—and on all sides it is accepted as the pleasantest way of passing the few hours of leisure our busy life affords for recreation and rest. The real success of a dinner, however, must always rest on the hostess ; she is the presiding genius of the feast, and on her tact, cleverness and discretion must its fortunes depend. The secret of being a good hostess lies very much in a woman's thoroughly enjoying society. If she is happy and amused, her satisfaction spreads to her guests, and the whole party is inspired by her condition of mind. A nervous woman or one who does not really enjoy society never makes her dinner as pleasant, for she is continually haunted by the thought that something will go wrong or she is tired and bored, and her moods equally react on her surroundings. Nothing is more infectious than pleasure or *ennui*, and a hostess in either frame of mind makes or mars her party.

MARY JEUNE.